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Ariosto, the Great Metaphysician



Alessandro Giammei

In the early summer of 1917, summoned to his native Greece as a translator for the royal Italian army, Andrea de Chirico left his elective homeland on a steamboat, like a modern Jason. He and his brother had no passport, and even if they were conceiving Italy's most distinctive and influential contribution to modernism after Futurism, some military service was still the only failsafe way to officially become subjects of Vittorio Emanuele, whose grandfather's equestrian monument still looms in Giorgio's Turinese canvasses and in Andrea's *Chants de la mi-mort*. Among the small crew of vanguardist *flâneurs* that were sharing, within the Renaissance ramparts of Ferrara, the same seminal aesthetic vision, the younger de Chirico (better known by his nom de plume, Alberto Savinio) is the first to abandon the intellectual battlefield of the metaphysical city to get to an actual frontline, but his adventure is just another dreamlike *flânerie*, utterly incomparable with the eagerness of futurist chronicles or the pomposity of D'Annunzio's war poems. By the end of the conflict, such a mental and material navigation from the "first really modern city of Europe"¹ to one of its

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¹As Jacob Burkhardt famously described it (48). On Ferrara's modernism, and especially on the interwar period, see Moretti.

most ancient ports—Thessaloniki, where most of the author’s legendary childhood took place—is going to pass through his pen as a new, visionary *Argonautica* that will later fill five chapters of *Hermaphrodito*, the protean debut book of metaphysical literature.

On the spur of the moment, however, even before actually departing on the train to the port of Brindisi, a more concise, more ironic prose of wryly tranquil absurdity came out of Savinio’s *escritoire*, and the poet Francesco Meriano managed to publish it immediately, in July, on his avant-garde journal *La Brigata*. Almost an impromptu for typewriter, it is simply titled “Ferrara . . . Partenza” (“Ferrara . . . Departure”) and it opens on a note of dreamy familiarity.

I looked at it again, as a usual phenomenon: in the middle of that square sliced like a solar quadrant, I saw the very high marble column; on the top of the stem the adventurous poet, lived and died smacking of bourgeoisie. (69)²

There is a passer-by, a common bystander re-looking at an obvious object in a well known urban landscape: the statue of a poet, on a high pedestal, in the center of a nameless square. Yet it is hardly the object *per se*—which is, according to the letter, not the statue of a poet but *il poeta* tout court, the poet himself—that is qualified as habitual and familiar. What appears *consueto*, usual, is rather a “phenomenon” immediately described with the same denotative panache.

As if a sapper wind was blowing—but it was not—I looked at the enormous tubular shaft: it was swashing . . . washing . . . washing and it bent. It traced the fourth part of an ideal circle in the sky. It descended, like a benevolent white finger that intended to indicate, on the horizon: all clear, en avant, route!

Phlegmatically, without any noise, it tamely laid down on the grass, where it broke and loosened into a number of tambours that slowly rolled. They waited for a bit; then they liquefied like snowy drifts in the hollows of little valleys. (69)³

²“Riguardai come a fenomeno consueto: su quella piazza tagliata nell’ordine del quadrante solare, vidi nel mezzo la colonna altissima di marmo; in cima al gambo il poeta avventuroso, vissuto e morto in odor di borghesia.” All the translations from de Chirico’s and Savinio’s texts are my own.

³“Come ad un vento sapeur, che pur non arieggiava, guardai l’enorme fusto tubolare: scivolava. . . lava. . . lava e si piegò. Scrisse sul cielo la quarta parte di un cerchio ideale. Scese, come un dito benigno e bianco che volesse segnare, all’orizzonte: via libera, en avant, route! Con molta mollezza, senza rumore, s’adagiò mansueto sull’erba ove si ruppe e si snodò in tanti tamburi che piano rotolarono. Attesero un po’; poscia si sciolsero come residui nevosi nelle conche di piccole vallate.”

The same old column, probably met a thousandfold in its proverbial stasis, is now curved, out of the blue, by an engineer-wind that does not even blow; it lands on the lawn, it cracks, and its fragments melt: everything happens quietly on the page, in plain light, even “noiselessly,” “senza rumore,” while the urban wanderer contemplates the scene in flawless nonchalance. It is this impossible, yet unsurprising vision, this Nietzschean dream “dreamt with open eyes, at the height of noon, in the face of inexorable reality”⁴ that is “looked at again,” incongruously, as a “usual phenomenon.” And the marvel continues:

The poet in marble jumped off the pedestal on which the boredom of centuries had detained him for much too long, with the gliding pirouette of a telegraph deliverer bolting from a moving tram.

(‘LA PATRIA,’ written in black, stayed there, for the order of the peoples).

First of all he scratched his left buttock; then he whipped the theorbo, which was slung around his neck by a knotted twine, over his shoulder, and he walked with saccadés and shaky steps towards palazzo Massari, pulling some of his robe over the eyes to protect them from the blazing sun. (69–70)⁵

The only character of the scene is also part of its landscape; the awakened inorganic body of a statue that acts clumsily (like anyone would after centuries of standing sleep) and walks away. He (it?) scratches, shuffles, shades the marble eyes with marble cloth, then leaves the square and starts meandering in the city. It is hard to choose: is Savinio making his farewell to a monument (which incidentally comes to life at the same moment), or is the monument paying homage to the departing argonaut by bending its column and abjuring its own natural stasis? Is the observer actually witnessing a fictional phenomenon? Is he intellectually triggering one?

Readers are allowed to question the short prose by its own realistic features. Despite his bonds with both movements, Savinio is not, after all, a surrealist, nor a Dada experimentalist: his writing lacks the indeterminateness of associative reveries, rather demanding a rational interpretative effort. The “usual phenomenon” is absurd, not gratuitous. The use of credible details to describe an incredible event, the ironic composure of the point of view, the specific allusions

⁴“sognato a occhi aperti e in pieno meriggio in faccia all’inesorabile realtà” (de Chirico, “Arte metafisica” 672).

⁵“Il poeta di marmo era balzato dallo zoccolo ove troppa la noia dei secoli lo ratteneva, con la leggiadra pirouette d’un fattorino telegrafico che schizza da un tram tutto in corsa. («LA PATRIA», scritta in nero, rimase lì, per l’ordine dei popoli).

Prima si grattò la natica mancina; poi si buttò a tergo la teorba appesa al collo mediante una cordicella con nodi, e s’allontanò con passi saccadés e malsicuri verso il palazzo Massari, tirandosi sugli occhi un po’ della sua toga per schermirsi dal gran sole.”

to the material reality of Ferrara: all the tricks in the stylistic arsenal of Savinio's poetics are employed to produce an epiphany, to bring about revelation. Such a well-focused mystery is the fundamental ingredient of what has been called the "enigmatic quality" (Jewell) of metaphysical literature, in parallel and in unison with Giorgio's famous pictorial *enigmaticità*.⁶ After all, is a marble man very different from a mannequin? The 1914 metaphysical canvas by de Chirico that obsessed the French surrealists, *The Child's Brain*, displays the same objects described in "Ferrara . . . Partenza": a cityscape, a marble column, and a man made of the same substance. And it could be said that a poet in marble is the protagonist of another early masterpiece by de Chirico, *L'Incertitude du poète*. Is Savinio's animated statue just a metaphysical trope? Who is the adventurous poet?

A riddle may well remain open—it is often the case with de Chirico iconographies—but it has, by definition, a solution. Now, I do not intend to reduce Savinio's enigma of a Ferrarese afternoon to a banal, fully determinable puzzle, but only one square, in Ferrara, has a lawn with radial walkways converging on a vertical monument. Palazzo Massari is really close to it (just a few feet along Corso porta a mare), and the tram, now replaced by busses, used to run along its perimeter, while a white column has been towering in its geometrical center for five centuries. The name of the marble poet on that column is no enigma: it is carved, in black, on the same plate mentioned by Savinio—who chose, though, to quote just half of the engraving, and put it between the only pair of brackets in the whole text. "A LODOVICO ARIOSTO," says the inscription, "LA PATRIA." To Ludovico Ariosto, by his homeland (Fig. 1).

*

So, "il poeta di marmo" is none other than Ludovico Ariosto, the towering intellectual figure of Renaissance Ferrara, author of possibly the most influential epic poem in the whole of modern European literature. Not just any Ariosto though: the marmoreal one which, while I am writing these lines, still stands in the center of Piazza Ariostea, on a seventeenth-century column designed by Ercole Grandi. The same illustrious pedestal was meant to lodge the equestrian monument of duke Ercole I d'Este, then hosted a marble pope, Alexander VII, and then a marble emperor, Napoleon. Italy, the "patria," finally gave it

⁶"Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigma est?" is inscribed in his 1911 self-portrait, a sort of early visual manifesto: "And What Shall I Love if not the Enigma?"



Fig. 1. Piazza Ariostea (Ferrara) in a 1912 postcard.

to the author of the *Orlando Furioso* in 1833, even before becoming a united nation. After less than a century, Savinio dissolved its solid verticality in his metaphysical vision, setting the marble poet free without any direct mention to its name and its symbolical meaning. Such a fact—and it is a fact, even the “theorbo” odd detail is mirrored in the statue by a clearly visible lyre: “Ferrara . . . Partenza” is certainly set in Piazza Ariostea—did not raise much attention among interpreters and scholars of the *Metafisica*, a field of study that recently revalued Savinio’s contribution to Giorgio’s inventions,⁷ and often focused on

⁷See in particular Baldacci, *De Chirico* 100–01, and the heated debate that it generated on the pages of journals such as *Metafisica* between the Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico in Rome and the Archivio della Metafisica in Milan. Jewell’s monograph on the Dioscuri and Wieland’s work are among the many that, in the last fifteen years, have approached the *Metafisica* from both the brothers’ perspectives.

the import of the Ferrarese architectural environment for the art of the two brothers.⁸ Therefore, as usually happens with well engineered enigmas, the identification is not a solution but rather the threshold to new mysteries and revelations.

What may puzzle a connoisseur of the brothers' imagery in the first place is the square itself, the *piazza*, so rapidly and clearly sketched at the beginning of the prose. Squares have a strong meaning in an architectural, urbanophile aesthetics as the *Metafisica*: they work as "meta-signifiers," or "spacial metaphors" (Merjian 159). Savinio did not choose a typical *piazza d'Italia*, one of the well codified urban sceneries that had substantiated Giorgio's new style since the first decade of the century.⁹ To give life to a monument—another meaningful artistic gesture, as I am going to argue—he rather preferred a unique, uncannily vertical set. Ferrara offered way more 'metaphysical' locations: if not piazza del Municipio, with its even obvious equestrian monument, or the geometrical piazzetta Sant'Anna where Tasso spent his forced seclusion, at least piazza Savonarola, on which de Chirico later insisted in a Ferrarese memory dedicated to fellow painter Achille Funi. The statues in those squares indwell short pedestals, like the many depicted by Giorgio in Paris, Florence, Turin; there are no lawns, no tramways, and in the Sant'Anna square there is even a flight of arches that could be easily qualified as '*dechirichiana*.' Savinio's "enormous tubular shaft" contrasts with the strongly Italian organization of metaphysical cityscapes, and with de Chirico's open rejection of "mass and height" ("*Arte Metafisica*" 293)¹⁰ based on Schopenhauer's "Metaphysics of the Beautiful." In the collection of aesthetic ideas included in *Parerga and Paralipomena*, the German thinker—a philosophical father, along with Nietzsche, of the de Chirico brothers' poetics—declares the "absurdity" of vertical plinths, embracing the aesthetics of Italian monuments:

It is an obvious lack of taste, in fact an absurdity, to put a statue on a pedestal ten to twenty feet high where no one can ever see it clearly Seen from a distance, it is not clear; but when we approach it, it is so high up that it has a clear sky as its background, which dazzles the eyes. In Italian cities, especially in Florence and Rome, the statues stand in large numbers in the squares and streets, but are all on quite low pedestals so that they can be clearly seen Thus even here we see the good taste of the Italians.

⁸A recent exhibition in the Palazzo Diamanti (see Baldacci, *De Chirico a Ferrara*) offered an occasion to re-think the impact of the city on the 'metaphysicians.'

⁹See Baldacci, "The Nationalization," and Merjian 156–59.

¹⁰"L'uomo imbecille, cioè l'antimetafisico, è isintivamente portato verso l'aspetto della massa e dell'altezza, verso una specie di wagnerismo architeturale."

The Germans, on the other hand, are fond of a tall confectioner's stand with reliefs to illustrate the exhibited hero. (450)

This passage, probably read in German during his artistic education, clearly made a strong impression on de Chirico, who quoted it more than once. The implied concept of a tasteful and metaphysically beautiful ideal urban landscape (horizontal squares, low pedestals, visible monuments) is not just deducible from the visual balance of his most famous pictorial cities: it has also been verbally elaborated—radicalized, one may argue—and presented as a sort of invitation, by Schopenhauer, to cut off German plinths in order to lower the statues to the level of the Italian ones. In 1919 for instance, on *Valori Plastici*, Giorgio signed a crucial essay on metaphysical art (“Sull’arte metafisica”) in which he clearly states:

Schopenhauer, who knew a thing or two on this matter, advised his fellow countrymen not to place the statues of their famous men on columns or too high pedestals, but rather to put them on low plinths, ‘as they do in Italy, he said, where some marble men seem to be on the same level of the passers-by and to walk with them.’ (291)¹¹

In his prose then, Savinio is playing with a visual shock: in the metaphysical city par excellence, in the place where he and his brother are gaining their Italianity through military service and artistic leadership, he picks the only ‘non-Italian’ scenery and sets there a pivotal moment of his own legal and intellectual Italianization.

Crossing the boundaries between painting and literature, aesthetic theory and fictional autobiography, does not mean stretching the point here. Visual, philosophical, and literary revelations are interdigitated in the oeuvre of the two Dioscuri of the *Metafisica*: themes and tropes fluidly permeate different codes, coming to the surface of materiality in different forms. One of the first impressions of Ferrara that Giorgio captured on paper, for instance, is a poem dedicated to Corrado Govoni, the anomalous futurist writer who hosted him and his brother when they first arrived in the *città metafisica*. In the verses, transcribed as an epigraph at the beginning of Savinio’s “city song” «Frara» *città del Worbas*, the urban space of the Po valley—as in

¹¹“Schopenhauer, che la sapeva lunga in tali faccende, consigliava ai suoi conterranei di non porre le statue dei loro uomini illustri sopra colonne o piedistalli troppo alti ma di posarle invece su zoccoli bassi, ‘come si usa in Italia, diceva, ove alcuni uomini di marmo sembrano trovarsi al livello dei passanti e camminare con essi.’” My translation here is largely based on the one provided in Soby’s monograph. Soby’s version (35), which made this passage famous among de Chirico scholars, is completely satisfying but cuts parts of the text.

Schopenhauer's Italianate ideal—is crossed by passers-by sharing the same visual plane with statues: “In the city where he is praised among a thousand statues on pedestals / so low that it looks like they are walking along with with the hasty citizens . . .” (“Frammenti” 47).¹²

Another poem by de Chirico—later, this time, than Savinio's farewell, and likely influenced by the imagery of the prose—envisions the exile of the marble men from a deserted Ferrara:¹³ their pedestals, Italian enough not to need to be bent and destroyed during the dismount, remain alone, just as all the other elements of inanimate architecture:

All the houses are empty
 Swallowed by the aspirator sky.
 All the squares deserted.
 All the pedestals widow.
 The statues—emigrated in long
 Stone caravans
 Towards far away ports . . . (“«Frammenti»” 54)¹⁴

The consistence of the motif of living statues on low plinths makes the visual shock of “Ferrara . . . Partenza” more evident: the “phenomenon,” the animation, is indeed “familiar”—“a theme that ‘we’ know well” will comment the author in a review of Cocteau's *Le sang d'un Poète* (“Il sangue” 163)¹⁵—all the rest is rather disorienting. In addition, this is the first time that a moving inorganic man, in a metaphysical work of art, has a name: Savinio provides the reader with all the details to recognize Ariosto, the “adventurous poet.” It

¹²“Nella città ove l'acclamano tra mille statue su piedistalli / si bassi che sembra esse camminino coi cittadini frettolosi . . .”

¹³A similar parade of statues jumping off low plinths and gathering will later be re-enacted by Giorgio's fantasy in a 1939 text on Turinese painter Paola Levi-Montalcini: “Allora tutto il popolo delle statue in marmo o in bronzo, i grandi uomini che durante tutto l'anno stanno immobili sopra i loro zoccoli bassi in mezzo al viavai continuo dei veicoli e dei pedoni, scendono penosamente dai loro piedestalli e dopo essersi distesi le membra s'incamminano prudentemente verso quella famosa Piazza Castello dove hanno luogo i loro misteriosi conciliaboli.” (“Paola Levi-Montalcini” 873).

¹⁴“Tutte le case sono vuote / Risucchiate dal cielo aspiratore. / Tutte le piazze deserte. / Tutti i piedistalli vedovi. / Le statue – emigrate in lunghe / Carovane di pietra / Verso porti lontani . . .”

¹⁵“Parlava una statua (tema che ‘noi’ conosciamo bene) e moveva gli occhi.” In Cocteau's 1930 film there is indeed a moving statue, which has also been indicated as the fountainhead of the motif for Savinio's by Bernardi (214). Although, not only the theme is vital, as I just showed, way before the release of *Le Sang*, but Savinio himself reclaims the paternity of it in the 1945 review (“‘we’ [‘the metaphysicians,’ or simply ‘me’ in *pluralis maiestatis*] know it well”). Moreover, while Cocteau's vision is rooted in the myth of Pygmalion, Savinio's versions of the trope is based on an original reading of Schopenhauer and of Nietzsche's idea of petrification, which will be important for Giorgio's *Autoritratto* discussed in this study.

is then this specific character, along with the *piazza* which bears his name, that inaugurates a new trope in the theatre of reified men (or humanized objects) staged by the *Metafisica*. To remain in the field of literature, the statue of Ovid that will guide the protagonist in *Dico a te*, *Clio* for instance, as well as the one of Mercury in *Vita di Mercurio*, are developments of this narrative embryo. After all, when he had to produce a readers' guide to *Hermaphrodito*, Savinio famously declared his first book the one seed of all his subsequent written and painted works ("Piccola guida" 927). And the specific germ of "Ferrara . . . Partenza," sixth section of the seminal volume, is destined to bloom in the author's aesthetic meditation, which will in fact embrace as authentically "modern" and "Italian" only an art capable of "making the statues dismount their pedestals and join our company" ("Pittori Italiani" 568).¹⁶

*

Are we allowed to imagine an Ariosto "poet in marble" who, towards the end of the first decade of the last century, joined the company of the Dioscuri at the very peak of their visual and literary research? That specific statue, as a matter of fact, appeared also in the metaphysical visions of Giorgio, who wrote, exactly one year after his brother's departure, a series of urban expositions related to his Ferrarese canvases in order to argue a theoretical distinction between his art and mysticism (and therefore Impressionism—if not French painting in general—intended as a sort of "coloristic spiritualism"). The most powerful and enigmatic vision in such a gallery of ekphrastic strolls in the city, narrated after three descriptions that have been connected with just as many specific cityscapes painted in the same years (see *Il meccanismo* 63), is dominated by the apparition of none other than the "poet in marble," casually met during a metaphysical *flânerie*.

Yesterday, in the afternoon, passing through a street that stretches long and slow flanked by high and dark houses, I saw a column appearing at the end, surmounted by a statue which I later would have known to be the one of Ariosto. Seen this way, between those two walls of blackened stone—that looked like the walls of an ancient sanctuary—the monument got something mysterious and solemn, and the rather metaphysicizing

¹⁶"L'arte . . . che dà una personalità agli oggetti, un'anima alle cose, che fa scendere le statue dagli zoccoli e le aggrega alla nostra compagnia."

passer-by would have expected to hear the voice of a god prophesying. (“Arte metafisica” 673)¹⁷

The brief memory is recalled to give an example of what a metaphysical fact (a “fatto metafisico”) is. Just a few lines afore it is explained that experiences of occultism such as mind reading or mediumship are not “fatti metafisici”—ascribable to charlatanry and obtuse irrationality, those mountebankery phenomena lack “the joy, . . . the serenity that, in art, is provoked by the apparition of a metaphysical image” (“Arte metafisica” 673).¹⁸ Conversely, the unexpected visual manifestation of the statue in Ferrara, “between those two walls of blackened stone”, was blessed with the gladsome quietude of metaphysical facts. The choice of Ariosto’s monument here may, again, arouse the reader’s suspicion.

In the same prose, the marble poet is also an excuse to talk about how ingenuously the primitives used to isolate those special things that their “vague mystical instinct” was able to separate from ordinary objects, while a modern “artefice” (a material creator of art, an intellectual artisan) can consciously, willingly distinguish such things (“tali cose”) from the chaotic mass of visible matter, and even artificially calibrate their natural grade of significance. A true artist then, according to de Chirico’s theory of vision, can not only discover metaphysical objects, but also manipulate their power by “guiding, or better increasing, fixing or shrewdly exploiting their metaphysicality . . . their metaphysical state.”

Such a metaphysical state is represented, in those objects that are endowed with it, by a badge that determines its grade. No need to say that the graduated object, intrinsically, is worth as much as a non-graduated one. Objects that are garnished and decorated in such a way acquire a special value and significance in the crowd of polymorphic and monomorphic volumes that encumber our planet. (“Arte metafisica” 673)¹⁹

¹⁷“Teri, nel pomeriggio passando per una via che s’allunga lenta e stretta fiancheggiata da case alte e scure vidi apparire in fondo una colonna sormontata da una statua che seppi poi essere quella dell’Ariosto. Visto così, tra quelle due pareti di pietra annerata—che parevano muri d’un santuario antico—il monumento assumeva un *ché* di misterioso e di solenne, e il passante tampoco metafisicizzante si sarebbe aspettato di udire la voce d’un nume vaticinare.”

¹⁸“quella gioia . . . quella serenità che ci procura in arte l’apparizione di un’immagine metafisica.”

¹⁹“Tale stato metafisico viene rappresentato negli oggetti che lo possiedono da un distintivo che ne determina il grado. S’intende che intrinsecamente l’oggetto graduato vale quanto quello non graduato. Gli oggetti fregiati e gallinati in tal modo acquistano tra la folla dei volumi polimorfi o monomorfi che ingombrano il nostro pianeta, un valore e un significato speciale.”



Fig. 2. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Great Metaphysician* (*Il grande metafisico*), 1917–18, oil on canvas, 104.5 × 69.8 cm, private collection. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

Reading this passage and considering that, as I am about to argue, the meeting with Ariosto’s monument, just as all the other Ferrarese visions included in the essay, is reflected in one of Giorgio’s metaphysical canvasses (in fact, possibly the most important one of the period), one shall ultimately suppose that not only the choice of the marble poet is meaningful, but that such an object—the petrified poet on his pedestal in that specific square—is graced, to use de Chirico’s words, by a high “grade” of “metaphysicality.” After all, the painter himself “graduated” it, entitling the painting that represents its apparition with a rather self-explanatory (and yet enigmatic) qualification: “*Il grande metafisico*,” “The great metaphysician” (Fig. 2).

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There is a number of recurrent characters in de Chirico's metaphysical paintings—almost the small nomenclature of a modern mythology: the Revenant, the Trovatore, the Philosopher, the Archaeologist, and so on. Among these anthropomorphic protagonists with no specific identity, only one subject, painted exactly while Savinio was writing about the poet in marble,²⁰ is named after de Chirico's aesthetics itself. The word *metafisica*, in the titles of other paintings of the same period, always designates a quality—there are 'metaphysical interiors' for instance, or 'metaphysical compositions.' In the case of *Il grande metafisico* instead, the adjective becomes a noun for the first and only time, reinforced in turn by a plain, eloquent attribute.

A comparison with *fin de siècle* photos of the square makes it quite easy to accept that the scenery is, again, Piazza Ariostea: the composition consists in a metaphysical visualization of the same monument described by Savinio in "Ferrara . . . Partenza" and by de Chirico himself in his 1918 writings about urban visions and metaphysical facts. If the visual parallel does not suffice, Filippo de Pisis, a younger artist who gravitated towards the Dioscuri's Scuola Metafisica during the Ferrarese phase, confirmed it verbally in the same year, during a conference on modern art at the Teatro del Casino in Viareggio ("Pittura Moderna" 139).²¹ But while the identification of the piazza, despite its anomalous verticality, is admissible with little or no effort, its main implication remains rather surprising, and shifts our understanding of metaphysical art in Ferrara. The great metaphysician in *The Great Metaphysician*—in fact, the only 'metaphysician' in de Chirico's painting—is a specific person: Ludovico Ariosto (or, to be precise, his statue). This petrified person is also the "poet in marble" revived by Savinio in 1917, and the prophesying god appeared in de Chirico's 1918 essay.

Before the 1917–18 painting, reproduced on the first issue of *Valori Plastici* almost immediately, de Chirico never organized his *piazze*

²⁰Giorgio will later re-use the iconography of *Il grande metafisico* in works with the same title: two paintings (1925, 1971) and a 1970 bronze sculpture that has been posthumously re-casted in 1985.

²¹"Bisognerebbe che voi vi foste fermati un giorno nell'alta quiete meriggiale di Piazza Ariostea a Ferrara, dove il quadro è stato dipinto, per sentire la grande suggestione che a me produce lo sfondo della tela 'Il grande metafisico' del De Chirico." De Pisis will directly connect again the square to the painting two years later during another conference in Rome ("[Sulla pittura metafisica]"147). De Pisis himself has experienced metaphysical visions in the same square, as his 1917–1918 proses reveal, and I am going to work on his own relationship with Ariosto in further developments of this research.

around a vertical element. After it, he turned to quite different subjects, mainly self-portraits and vast, realistic landscapes with villas, knights, and horses. A sum of metaphysical tropes such as geometric tools, uncanny perspectives, idealized urban motives, and, of course, mannequins, *The Great Metaphysician* is also the swan-song of metaphysical painting and a threshold to the 'return to order' and to de Chirico's so called 'romantic phase.' A farewell to Ferrara, again, and—here is my point—a revival of Ferrara's most illustrious marmoreal citizen. In the following paragraphs, I propose an interpretation of the role of Ariosto as a key figure for such a fundamental turning point in metaphysical painting and literature. I will explore de Chirico's identification with the Ferrarese Renaissance genius, and I will show how the revival of a very anomalous classic like the *Orlando Furioso* could provide, in the early twentieth century, a unique model to build up an Italian (and anti-French) modernism balanced between tradition and vanguardism, intelligence and imagination. However, before arriving at the conclusions, I intend to argue that the Ariostean turn at the end of the second decade of the century is the visible outlet of a subterranean river of influence that has its fountainhead at the very beginning of de Chirico's and Savinio's creative lives.

Some of the earliest theoretical and autobiographical writings by Giorgio had been composed in Paris between 1911 and 1915, and remained unpublished for seventy years.²² The artist left some of the manuscripts in his studio in Montparnasse, where they were collected by Jean Paulhan along with drawings, paintings, and other objects. The rest of the papers though, almost fifty pages, traveled with him to Italy and were acquired by Paul Eluard, who in turn gave them as a present to Pablo Picasso in 1937. The file, now preserved in the Musée Picasso in Paris,²³ includes a 1912 meditation which provides one of the very few possible glimpses in de Chirico's mental laboratory before the most illustrious phase of his work. In it, he mentions only two literary sources for his juvenile inspiration. The first is the *Odyssey*, and in particular the episode of Ogygia ("un passage d'Homère me captive—Ulysse dans l'isle de Calypso") which is in point of fact literally quoted by the artist in *L'enigma dell'oracolo*—and by his brother in the lost drawing *L'oracolo* (Roos 274–77)—through the romantic filter of Arnold Böcklin's *Odysseus und Kalypso*. The second is Ariosto, with the magical realism of his chivalric imagery:

²²On the story of these papers, see *Il meccanismo* 428.

²³For further details on this file, see Seckel-Klein 97–110.

or rather while reading Ariosto: Ruggiero, that kind of errant knight resting under a tree, falling asleep while the horse grazes around him; everything is solitary and silent, one would expect to see a dragon passing by in the skies; the scene enralls me, I imagine the knight, the horse, the landscape, all at once, it's almost a revelation but this is not yet enough for me. ("[Manoscritti Eluard]" 611)²⁴

Homer has been widely accepted, also via Nietzsche, as a primary source of influence for de Chirico by critics, while Ariosto hardly appears in any index of catalogues and monographs. However, the absence of any subject comparable to this 1912 Ariostean passage on Ruggiero in the artist's early production is suspicious, also because Böcklin—who is explicitly mentioned a few lines after—was profoundly inspired by the *Furioso*, and de Chirico had plenty of canvasses to elaborate on, as he did on the Homeric scene of Calypso. "From Ariosto, Böcklin drew inspiration for some of his finest paintings"²⁵ will indeed note Savinio himself in his most famous book (*Narrate* 45). In any case, the poet in marble that will become his great metaphysician was clearly already an influential reading in de Chirico's Parisian years, and it has been even conjectured (Roos 277–78) that a series of very early chivalric works, based on the reading of Ariosto and on Böcklin's Ariostean iconographies, may actually have been painted before 1910, but then destroyed by the artist himself after the beginning of his fully metaphysical phase. Another lost proof of the import of Ariosto's poem on the birth of metaphysical aesthetics and poetics is Savinio's *Poema fantastico*, a melodrama inspired by both Greek and Italian epics. We know about this abandoned project from de Chirico's memoirs, in which it is dated to 1909 and linked to Hellenic mythology and to Renaissance chivalric poetry (*Memorie* 64).

Echoes of Ariosto's poetics are also traceable in the Dioscuri's metaphysical work before the 1918 turn. Maurizio Calvesi insisted on the symbol of the "packet-boat" (15) to describe de Chirico's mental and visual voyage through metaphysical painting, drawing on a nautical imagery that is mirrored in the painter's subjects and in his conception of art as a mental adventure. Such an imagery, if one looks at the metaphors and narrative strategies that substantiate it in both the de Chiricos' writings, appears to be an elaboration of

²⁴"ou bien en lisant Arioste, Roger, ce type de Chevalier errant se repose sous un arbre, il s'endort, le cheval broute l'herbe autour de lui; tout est solitaire et silencieux, on s'attendrait à voir passer un dragon dans les airs; la scène me captive, je me figure le chevalier, le cheval, le paysage tout d'un coup, c'est presque une révélation mais cela ne me suffit pas encore."

²⁵"Dall'Ariosto Böcklin trasse l'ispirazione di alcuni suoi quadri più belli."

Ariosto's contradictory ideas on travels, which intertwine geography and poetry, imaginary flights on the hippogriff and circumnavigations of planispheres.²⁶

De Chirico's self-representations as a modern artist in the Ferrarese years are often based on an association between his immobile room and a sailing ship. In a 1916 poem he writes: "My window is the hatch of a boat. / My easel is a mast without its sail" ("Frammenti" 45),²⁷ and a year later, in a fragment titled "Promontorio," the hardwood floor of his studio is described as "similar to the varnished deck of a world-wise packet-boat" (50).²⁸ In 1918, whilst publishing the first photo of *Il grande metafisico*, the artist repeats and clarifies the same metaphor: "my room is a beautiful vessel on which I can experience adventurous journeys, worthy of a stubborn explorer" (52).²⁹ The idea of traveling around the world while sitting at one's desk is at the core of a famous passages in Ariosto's *Satires*—a series of bitter letters in Dantesque tercets written right after the first edition of the *Furioso*. "I am content to live in my native land" declares the poet in the *Satira III*, adding that he will explore the rest of the world "with Ptolemy," on a map: "e tutto il mar, senza far voti quando / lampeggi il ciel, sicuro in su le carte / verrò, più che sui legni, volteggiando" (lines 64–66). "Without ever making vows when the heavens flash with lightning, I will go bounding over all the seas, more secure aboard my maps than aboard ships" (Wiggins 61).

Ariosto's self-fashioning as a proud stay-at-home, able to visit any corner of the world by flying "in su le carte" (literally "on the papers," both maps and literary pages) is paralleled by de Chirico's one, which will evolve in a narrative scene of the metaphysical novel *Hebdomeros* (81) and later, in 1968, will suggest the autobiographical iconography of *Ritorno di Ulisse*. The fundamental Ferrarese trope of the 'metaphysical interior,' based on the confusing overlapping of domestic scenes and landscapes—the room and the world, the window and the canvas—could stem from the same Renaissance idea, just as the visual obsession with cartography that characterizes many metaphysi-

²⁶The theme of geography in Ariosto's work has recently raised the attention of a number of scholars. Interestingly, one of the earliest essays on the matter ("Ariosto Geografo") has been written by Massimo Bontempelli, a friend and collaborator of the de Chirico brothers. The influence of Ariosto on Bontempelli's magical realism has never been part of the scholarly debate, and I am going to address it in further developments of this research.

²⁷"La mia finestra è un boccaporto di nave. / Il mio cavalletto è un'antenna senza vela."

²⁸simile al ponte verniciato di un paccobotto di lunga navigazione."

²⁹"La mia camera è un bellissimo vascello ove posso fare viaggi avventurosi, degni d'un esploratore testardo."

cal compositions. And, when Savinio explores the theme of traveling in his narrative, also *Hermaphrodito* seems to echo Ariosto's immobile journeys "in su le carte," especially when an Italian itinerary is, at the same time, experienced on the seat of a train and mentally traversed on a map drawn on the handkerchief of a fellow passenger (see "La partenza" 110–11).

The *Satires*, of course, are one of Ariosto's less known works, and were probably not among the formative readings of the two Dioscuri—while we know that their father, Evaristo, made them acquainted with the *Furioso*.³⁰ Yet, exactly in 1916, a new edition of the ironic autobiography was published by Massimo Bontempelli, who will be one of the closest comrades of the brothers during the return to order and, in 1940, will ask de Chirico to draw seven illustrations for his spin-off of Ariosto's poem, *Sulle ali dell'ippogrifo*, a short story that connects Ruggiero's flight with Renaissance utopias in a melancholic critique of fascist Italy.

*

Besides unearthing the literary self-portrayal embedded in the *Satires*, Bontempelli's edition of Ariosto's minor works had the merit of circulating another portrait—this time painted—of the poet in marble. On the frontispiece of the book, the oblique gaze of Titian's *Portrait of a Man* welcomes the readers from a cropped, black and white reproduction that occupies most of the page (Fig. 3).

Mario Ursino already confronted de Chirico's famous 1924 *Auto-ritratto* (Fig. 4)—which represents the coronation of a long artistic research on the subject of self-portraits—with the sixteenth-century masterpiece that has traditionally been considered as a portrait of Ariosto, insisting on the similarities between Giorgio's swelling jacket and the exquisite quilted doublet that is basically the protagonist of Titian's painting (60–61).

I do not find such a formal, plastic parallel particularly convincing. In fact, I believe that the two portraits are antithetical as far as pictorial values are concerned, and that the two sleeves in the foreground—one chalky, stuffed, and heavy, the other satiny, airy, and calligraphic—are poles apart. Yet, the position of the busts in relation with the horizontal plane of the sills, evolved from the portraits of Giorgione's Venetian school, is comparable, and the very distinctive psychological attitude

³⁰As Giorgio himself wrote in a 1928 letter, now preserved in the Archivio Antonio Vastano and partially transcribed in Roos 265.



Fig. 3. Tiziano Vecellio, Portrait of Gerolamo (?) Barbarigo, 1509 ca., oil on canvas, 81.2 × 66.3 cm, National Gallery, London. Image © The National Gallery, London.

of the faces (the lines of the lips and of the eyebrows, the direction of the eyes, the balance between light and shadow) suggests a kinship. But what really pushes me to underline the relation between the *Autoritratto* and the black and white photo of the Renaissance portrait from the National Gallery is, once again, Ariosto. Clearly, as in most of de Chirico's self-portraits, the canvas is influenced by Poussin's and Böcklin's models, as critics have noticed (see for instance Fagiolo dell'Arco 105–06). Still, the posture and expression of Titian's *Portrait* have a role in my reading of the *Autoritratto* because they are features



Fig. 4. Giorgio de Chirico, *Self-portrait (Autoritratto)*, 1924, tempera on canvas, 75 × 62 cm, private collection. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome.

of the poet in marble who verbally depicted himself in the *Satires*: a serene, inactive, visionary genius. And what de Chirico does in the 1924 painting, in a symmetrical subversion of Savinio’s animation of Ariosto’s statue, is to turn himself into a statue, to become a monument by petrifying his own body. A damning hint that connects Savinio’s demonomentalized Ariosto with this ‘Giorgio in marble’ is the detail of the fossilized lyre in the background, on the right, which alludes to the “theorbo” in “Ferrara . . . Partenza” and, of course, to Ariosto’s lyre in the Piazza Ariostea monument. And the game of mirrors that interlaces



Fig. 5. Giorgio de Chirico, *Ottobrata*, 1924, tempera on canvas, 135 × 183 cm, private collection. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome. Image © La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC (Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee).

portraits and self-portraits, men in flesh and men in marble, comes to full circle with the idea, proposed by Maurizio Fagiolo dell'Arco, that *The Great Metaphysician* could be read as a self-portrait too (101). In an epode wrote in 1917 for de Pisis, and published at the end of the essay in which his meeting with the marble Ariosto is described, Giorgio himself prophesied “*un dì sarò anch'io statua solitaria*”: one day, I will be a solitary statue too (“*Arte metafisica*” 674).

With the *Autoritratto* still on his easel, de Chirico sent two large canvasses to the 1924 Biennale in Venice, the first major international exhibition to welcome his work and to confirm the rise of his fame. Both the paintings, dramatically different from any of his famous early works, are based on a chivalric imagery: the departure of an errant knight in *Ottobrata* (Fig. 5), and a battle with horses, swords, and pikes in *I duelli a morte* (Fig. 6). I believe that these two emblematic compositions of the ‘romantic phase’ perfectly show the consequences of the revelation triggered by the meeting with Ariosto in Ferrara.

What informs de Chirico’s enigmatic chivalric scenes and still-lives throughout the Twenties—and, as it will be soon apparent, his brother’s



Fig. 6. Giorgio de Chirico, *The Duels to Death* (*I duelli a morte* - *Les duels à la mort*), 1924, tempera on canvas, 131 × 188 cm, private collection. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome. Image © La Biennale di Venezia, ASAC (Archivio Storico delle Arti Contemporanee).

experimental narrative of the period—is the *Furioso's* magical but realistic atmosphere, its inextricable tangle of plots and characters, its ability to overlap classical myths, medieval plots, and Renaissance themes in a way that enchanted painters and philosophers during the Romanticism. Along these lines, *I duelli a morte* is finally, more than ten years after the Homeric *L'enigma dell'oracolo*, the Ariostean painting based on Böcklin that one could expect to see after reading de Chirico's 1912 Parisian prose. Its iconography is in fact based on Böcklin's works inspired by the *Furioso*. For instance, the armored body of the knight in the foreground, on the right, is essentially a copy of *Der Abenteurer* (Fig. 7)—and the detail of the skulls on the left is literally retraced from the same painting—while the warrior in the background, with the spear, the helmet, and the cloak, looks like a combination of the Ruggieros in the two 'rescues of Angelica' painted by the German master (Figg. 8–9).

The same iconography is also at the core of one of the earliest visual experiments by Savinio of which we are aware today. Dated



Fig. 7. Arnold Böcklin, *The Adventurer* (*Der Abenteurer*), 1882, tempera on canvas, 116 × 150.5 cm, Kunsthalle Bremen, Bremen. Image © Kunsthalle Bremen.

between 1925 and 1926 by Pia Vivarelli (131), the collage *La Naisance de Vénus* (Fig. 10) shows a faceless version of Böcklin's Angelica emerging from a marmoreal sprawl of collapsed columns and ruins. In a 1919 essay that bears a Greek version of the same title, "Anadioménon," the artist used the myth of Aphrodite rising from the ocean to describe the evolution of art, and compared the peak of modern aesthetics (i.e., of course, metaphysical painting) to the last phase of Greek sculpture—the phase in which statues detach their limbs from their body, and start to move and smile (58–59). There is no need, at this point, to underline the relevance of such an imagery, evoked right after the meeting with the moving statue of Ariosto in Ferrara. Interestingly, the essay is closed with a reflection on irony (62–63), the quintessential Ariostean trait, which is a fundamental aspect of painting in Savinio's theory. Irony, in "Anadioménon," is one of those intellectual foundations of modern pictorial sensitivity that are missed in France, where art almost reached its "pienezza spirituale" (59) in the nineteenth century but then stopped, leaving the lead to the Ital-



Fig. 8. Arnold Böcklin, *Angelica Guarded by the Dragon* (*Angelica von einem Drachen bewacht*), 1837, tempera on wood, 46 × 37 cm, Nationalgalerie - Staatliche Museen, Berlin. Image © Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY.

ian genius of metaphysical painters such as de Chirico and Carrà. The same quality, in a later article on astronomy published in the newspaper *La Stampa*, distinguishes the serene, Italian intelligence of Ariosto's interplanetary flights from the less imaginative proto-science-fiction of French fantasy: "il tipo contrario di Ariosto si chiama Flammarion" ("Mangiatore" 44).

It would be difficult to compare the Roman villa surrounded by knights in *Ottobrata* with a specific Ariostean scene. Like in *I duelli a morte*, the influence of German Romanticism is very evident, and Giovanna Rosario even proposed that the architecture that dominates this second painting could be a visual elaboration of the actual Roman villa on via Senese where Max Klinger lived at the beginning of the twentieth century (283). But again, mediated by the Böcklinian pictorial style that influenced de Chirico since his earliest phase, it is



Fig. 9. Arnold Böcklin, *Ruggiero frees Angelica from the Claws of the Dragon* (*Ruggiero befreit Angelica aus den Klauen des Drachen*), 1880 ca., oil on wood, 82.5 × 55 cm, Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf, Inv.-Nr. M 5047 (lost art work). Image © Museum Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf.

a Renaissance epic atmosphere that inspires the almost anti-modern iconography of the 1924 tempera. The younger Dioscuro offers again a confirmation with his writings: in the same year, with the same autumnal title, “Ottobrata,” Savinio published an ekphrastic prose that seems to translate Giorgio’s enigmatic chivalric vision into words, and openly mentions Ariosto’s poem along with Tasso’s later masterpiece: “The most beautiful poetry, the most profound and sumptuous art is inspired by autumn. I know entire poems, like the *Gerusalemme* or the *Orlando Furioso*, that are entirely set under an autumnal sky” (“Ottobrata” 17).³¹

³¹“La poesia più bella, l’arte più profonda e sontuosa s’ispira all’autunno. Conosco interi poemi, come la *Gerusalemme* e l’*Orlando Furioso*, i quali si svolgono interamente sotto il cielo autunnale.”

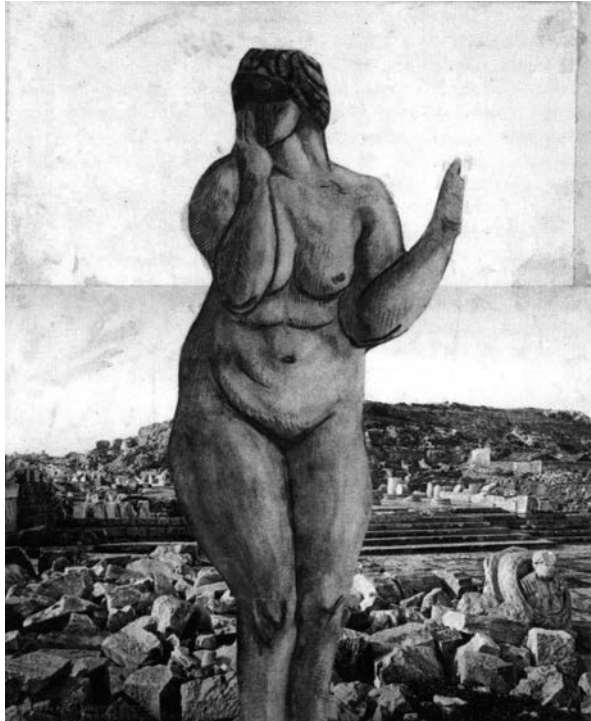


Fig. 10. Alberto Savinio, *The Birth of Venus* (*La Naissance de Venus*), 1925–26 (?), ink, watercolor, and collage on paper, 27.5 × 22.3 cm, private collection, Rome. © 2017 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / SIAE, Rome. Reproduced with permission of Ruggero Savinio.

So, the chivalric iconography of the Twenties that emerged after the aesthetic turn of *The Great Metaphysician* is haunted by Ariosto. The same happens, as expected, in Savinio's literature. Savinio's third book, elaborated between 1922 and 1925 and published in 1927, is tellingly titled *Angelica o la notte di maggio*—and it is worth noting that the author, besides painting the Ariostean couple of *Roger et Angelique* in 1931, will name his own daughter Angelica and her brother Ruggero. In the novel, based on the myth of Eros and Psyche, Angelica is not a princess from Catai but rather a poor, narcoleptic dancer. However, just as in Ariosto's poem, it is the desire to conquer her virginity that moves the story along. Moreover, the experimental narrative techniques used by the author are almost a modernist version of Ariosto's *entrelacement*: the voice of the narrator connects different

scenes and story-lines in a rapid, disorienting sequence of characters, digressions, and situations that come and go, interrupting his own narration and calling the attention of the reader.³² Almost twenty years later, to justify such an ironic twine of simultaneous stories, Savinio wrote that *Angelica* is a novel inspired by cinema (*Hermaphrodito* 934). And the idea that Ariosto is an ancestor of cinema, and that the *Orlando Furioso* is conceived and montaged as a film, has been formulated—way before Ronconi's famous rewriting for the screen—by a futurist cinematographer: Anton Giulio Bragaglia, who was very close with the de Chirico brothers and hosted Giorgio's first personal exhibition in his Casa d'Arte in 1919.

*

The open quotations and visualization of specific passages from Ariosto's epic by de Chirico and Savinio after World War II are quite a few,³³ and they participate in a complex game of re-use and revival of classical and early-modern cultural materials that is rather far from the original poetics of the *Metafisica*. Giorgio, for instance, will paint a series of Angelicas and will return to the chivalric imagery of the Twenties, while Savinio will directly refer to the *Furioso* as a model for modern language (*Nuova Enciclopedia* 55) and will himself attend to pictorial homages to Ariosto. This article does not intend to connect the brothers' late paintings and writings with their most celebrated earlier work through Ariosto, nor does it show cases of bare intertextuality—indeed, I did not need to cite any verse from the *Orlando Furioso* in order to prove my points. For the texts and objects hitherto discussed, in fact, Ariosto is not a traditional source, but rather an inspiring patron, a phantasmal presence met in flesh and blood (or better, in marble) at a pivotal creative moment: the end of the Great War, the end of the fundamental Ferrarese season, the end, arguably, of the *Metafisica* itself. The anti-metaphysical metaphysical masterpiece titled *The Great Metaphysician*, a portrait of the Ariosto in marble met by the Dioscuri during the war, shows all these liminal qualities, and it is unreadable without considering what the Renaissance poet meant for de Chirico and Savinio before and after their departure from Ferrara. Instead of revealing a textual or iconographic genealogy, the pattern

³²See for instance the alternation of scenes in *Angelica* 363–65.

³³Some interesting post-war canvasses by de Chirico are discussed in De Sanna's 2002 essay, and I recently submitted a paper on a 1940 *Perseus and Andromeda* re-named *Ruggiero and Angelica* that I hope will be soon published.

of secret or ignored coincidences unraveled in these pages forms the untold story of the de Chirico brothers' encounter with a master, with a metaphysician *avant-la-lettre* who triggered the most significant revolution in their aesthetics. A master that became a *sujet* more than a source, and that during the 'return to order'—after having been acknowledged as the *poeta di marmo* and the *grande metafisico*—offered a model of style, atmosphere, and Italianity for one of the less studied and most enigmatic periods of the Dioscuri's work. The special, almost spiritual influence of such a model, I believe, should be investigated in the writings and paintings of other protagonists of the 'Italian Surrealism' connected to the de Chiricos, like de Pisis, Bontempelli, Baldini.

In any event, Ariosto's legendary genius—his myth more than his stories—deeply influenced metaphysical painting and literature at their acme, and deserves to be included in the de Chirico brothers' exclusive pantheon of intellectual *auctoritates* along with Nietzsche, Homer, Leopardi, and Schopenhauer.

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